



ART THERAPY

Brushing away anxiety

An intensive art therapy group run during the summer holidays is helping looked-after young people in Sussex build up their self-esteem and confidence, explains the project's co-ordinator **Joanna Stevens**

Traditionally school summer holidays have meant therapy sessions cease for many of the looked-after children and young people who receive secondary mental health care within a CAMHS team.

For art therapists working for Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust this meant a wasted opportunity. Rather than the standard break, the school summer holidays have seen the development of an intensive group therapy programme.

This model of art therapy practice compliments term time interventions and means the young people are able to attend daily. The group has now been running each summer for five years and during that time only two young people have dropped out.

The group aims to increase self-esteem and social confidence, as well as to provide an essential base for group members to approach the transition between primary and secondary school. Felicity Aldridge, an art therapist who specialises in work with looked-after children, explains: "For looked-after children, change and

the loss of the familiar can be intensely difficult. Education is often disrupted if the anxieties about moving to a new school are overlooked. This is why we feel it's so important to run the project during the summer holidays."

The group is run in partnership with Brighton and Hove Council's intensive placement team. This multi-agency model brings together a team of art therapists and an intensive placement support worker. There's also scope for visitors to take part for a day or more. CAMHS workers, trainees and sometimes managers actively timetable days to support the group, valuing the opportunity to take part and learn more about this approach. Aldridge says: "During the year much of our work has to happen behind closed doors, but with the summer group the doors are always open, welcoming visitors into the group works on lots of levels. The young people gain further recognition for their art making and visitors go away inspired and moved by the buzz of creativity and the relationships that are being built."

An unexpected spin off of the open door approach has been the positive impact it has had on relationships within the building. As one staff member recalls: "We were initially concerned the group could be too disruptive but instead received compliments on how nice it was to hear the voices of young people enjoying themselves."

The group, generally made up of six young people, meets for three consecutive weeks for two hours each morning. The frequency of the sessions is designed to encourage focus and investment. It also echoes the pattern of regular school attendance, helping to establish a learning process linked to how both confidence in art making and in relationships develop over time.

Art provides a key focus within the group. The potential psychological and social learning possible through art is of foremost importance in developing the programme, yet staff allow meanings to emerge gradually as and when young people are ready.

By being responsive to the different needs of group members, activities are introduced which allow opportunities for individual expression as well as for collaboration. "We generally start the project with some planned activities and quite a structured approach," says Davey Sutherland from the local authority fostering and adoption team.

"We find working with clay to make treasure boxes or cups or using simple drawing exercises helps the young people relax. Once they have settled and feel familiar with the group, new ideas begin to arise and we let them develop, with the young people leading the way."

Alongside finished art works, mess making is often part of the summer group. This generally starts to happen as the young people become more confident and feel freer to explore and experiment with the art materials. It can also be an important way for them to express and work with difficult feelings.

Last year, three young women spent a number of days painting an outside wall. They wanted to make a mural but couldn't agree on what to do. They made repeated attempts, making lots of mess with liquid paint in the process. Each time they washed it off and cleared up until eventually they found a way of working together to agree and make their picture. The third team member Pete Betts explains the thinking behind this: "As a team it feels important we stay actively curious about the mess and

the young people's process. The group is about allowing them a space to work on their relationship difficulties in a very hands on way. The real therapeutic skill comes in containing the work and judging when to get involved."

The importance of discovering that one has permission to be messy and make a mess is well understood by staff. In fact this approach helps define the therapeutic function of the group, distinguishing it from a more familiar play scheme or activity programme where this way of working might be too difficult for staff and participants to contain and process. Creativity, so often disrupted due to a fear both of the unknown and making mistakes, is supported as participants struggle and frequently succeed in completing art works, making choices, tolerating frustration and the fear of rejection and accepting praise, recognition and success.

Each group ends with an exhibition, including work with ceramics, painting, sculpture and short films scripted and acted by the group. This event provides a focal point and celebration for participants, parents and staff. In the most recent group difficult and painful issues about self-harm and suicide were held in portraits and film, alongside wildly decorative teapots.

Betts photographs the group throughout the project. "At the end it's a great moment when we hand each participant an album full of pictures of

them taking part. It really helps bring home what they've achieved."

Young people and parents have consistently been positive about the value of the group highlighting the opportunities it provides for making friendships, learning new skills and gaining in self-esteem and confidence. One parent described how she had never known her son "to get on this well with other children" and how he now "feels more confident in himself". Another told us: "Sam becomes very anxious about leaving the house, but each morning she was excited to come to the group which speaks volumes about how much she was enjoying it. After each group Sam seemed calm and not anxious." For most the group offers one of the few successful experiences of group membership they have ever had.

The staff group want to continue to build on this work in Sussex and learn about how to further develop the work started in the group. They are also keen to find ways to introduce other professionals to the benefits of this approach, as well as looking into opportunities to research the work. ■

Joanna Stevens is an advisor for arts psychotherapies at Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

About the group

- The young people that attend are aged between 12-15.
- They have all been referred as part of a joint agency project between social services and CAMHS for children in care who have difficulties.
- All participants are children in care in the broadest sense, including those adopted, in family and friends placements and foster care.
- Some young people go on to attend an ongoing art therapy group if they wish, but others don't need to return as the summer group is enough for them to feel more confident and develop new friendships.